

ABSTRACT

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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DEGRADATION, HUMILIATION, PERSEVERANCE:
A STUDY OF FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVES IN COMPARISON WITH
FEMALE HOLOCAUST VICTIMS

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Thesis dated May 2008

This study investigates the lives of female sufferers of the Holocaust and American slavery by comparing the different experiences of female and male imprisonment. Critics' viewpoints on African-American slavery versus the Holocaust genocide were used to write this study. Lastly, it will be noted from renowned authors, their perspective of enslavement being much more torturous to women than men.

A historical-analysis approach will be used to record the lives of the women discussed. Diaries, biographies, and reputable sources such as scholarly journals are to be employed to verify and document the events of the Holocaust and American slavery.

The conclusion drawn from the research supports the idea that the aspects of female daily life in bondage consists of vulnerability to rape, forced motherhood, humiliation, sexual bargaining, pregnancy, abortion and fear for one's children.

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A STUDY OF FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVES IN COMPARISON
WITH FEMALE HOLOCAUST VICTIMS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ENGLISH

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude goes to all those who encouraged me to complete this arduous task. I am very grateful to have such wonderful guidance from my esteemed professors in the English Department. I would like to offer a special thanks to Dr. Georgene Bess-Montgomery and Dr. Laura Fine whose expertise and punctuality made it possible for me to complete this thesis. Furthermore, I would like to thank my family: my mother Bertha Marshall-Hailey, my father Vicente Marshall and my stepfather Earl Hailey, whose guidance, wisdom and steadfast support truly compelled me toward completion of this thesis. Finally, I would like to express much gratitude to my sister circle of friends/colleagues: Katrina Sandifer, Andrea Blake, Tamioka Brent, Maida Snape, Terica McKennis, Kattina Carthans, Hilda Koonce, Monica Benton, Clara Smith and those new acquaintances who have strengthened and inspired me through their intelligence as well as life experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Can suffering be compared and measured? Is it feasible to relate one massive tragedy with another? Why should a thesis comparing the enslavement of African-Americans to that of Jewish Holocaust victims, both consisting of numerous deaths, focus on women? This thesis demonstrates a specificity of everyday life and the ways in which men and women responded to these tragedies. The discussion of enslaved women provides a deeper understanding to the entire experience. The unique experience of being enslaved and female adds a necessary dimension to the tragedies as a whole.

In the initial steps of deciding a thesis topic I visited the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C in the summer of 2006. As I walked throughout the museum, I was deeply moved by the horrid images of brutality and the unsightly pictures of the living corpse-like Jewish figures that had been starved in the concentration camps. These images ignited a new passion in me to learn more about Jewish History. I began to reflect on my studies which led me to thoughts of the merciless cruelties of American slavery. I quickly remembered the books, poems, and short stories I read, movies I had watched and professors who had given me the inspiration to study this atrocity on my own.

After much consideration, I decided to work on a study that focused on women in these two abused groups. During my research, I noticed that many of the narratives and

other writings lacked a strong female presence and focused primarily on the male experience. The male narratives discuss the brutality experienced during slavery and the Holocaust, but focus primarily on men and their journey to freedom. Male texts are too often considered the definitive text for the experiences as a whole. It is the exclusion of women that compels me to work on this type of study.

Historically, women's stories have not been widely told. As we look back on monumental events, men's faces come to mind. For instance, with the Civil Rights Movement, we automatically think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., then Rosa Parks. This is also true for the Black Panther Party where we remember Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, then Kathleen Cleaver and Afeni Shakur. Although these women were responsible for much of the background work such as preparing pamphlets and organizing the breakfast programs for poor youth, men are credited with the majority of the success.

Similarly, while reviewing the literature for my thesis, I found that two of the leading male autobiographies for American slavery and the Holocaust did not give insight into the female experience. The books I chose are well-known and often suggested readings for African-American and Holocaust Literature courses. The *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass and *Night* by Elie Wiesel are very compelling autobiographies, but lack an in-depth description of the type of abuse women suffered. It can be argued that these particular autobiographies are portraying the author's specific experiences, but there has to be a more widely acclaimed representation of the female experience of equal importance. Far too often, the male interpretation is accepted as an official account of actual incidents and female interpretations have to be questioned or

approved before it can even be published. As I was reading Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel, I wondered where the strong presence of women was, and I had a longing to learn more about their particular experience in these adverse conditions.

In order to understand the differences in gender, it is imperative to have insight into male enslavement. Frederick Douglass' *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* is the paradigm for the African-American male's perspective, and Elie Wiesel's *Night* provides insight into the male Holocaust viewpoint. Enslaved men struggled with the torture of strenuous labor, brutal beatings, and the constant fear of separation. Additionally, they battled to maintain a sense of manhood in the face of enslavement.

Both autobiographies begin with an affectionate mother-son relationship that is quickly ended. In Douglass' case, he and his mother were separated when he was an infant. It was a customary practice for slave children and mothers to be separated at a very early age perhaps to eliminate the natural affection of mother and child. Douglass never saw his mother more than four times in his life. Each visit was very short in duration since she was a field hand and could expect to be whipped, if not in the field, by sunrise. He recalled warmhearted memories of his mother lying down with him to help him sleep, but before daybreak she was gone. By around age seven, Douglass' mother died. He was not allowed to be present during her illness nor at her death or burial.

Douglass spoke of a few incidents regarding the mistreatment of women, but they were an addition to his testimony of the brutality that all slaves received. Most of these incidents were stated matter-of-factly and directly followed by a continuance to his journey from slavery to freedom. On one particular event, however, Douglass expresses

deep concern and vivid details. He witnessed a severe beating of his Aunt Hester who had been beaten for disobeying her master by going off and being found in the company of a young man she had been forbidden to see. Douglass stated he would never forget the beating. His Aunt Hester was taken into the kitchen and stripped from her neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back bare. Their master then forced her to cross her hands, while shouting obscenities at Douglass's aunt. After their master crossed and tied her hands with rope, he forced her onto a stool then tied her hands to a hook. Following that, he yelled, "Now you d___d b___h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" (Douglass 4). It was at that moment Douglass observed their master beat his very own aunt with a heavy cowskin. Soon, blood was dripping to the floor, and Douglass became aware of slavery's brutality. On another occasion Douglass acknowledges that female slaves were used as breeders which helped increase slaveholders' wealth.

Most of Douglass' autobiography discusses a physical and mental journey throughout the book. At the time of Douglass' departure from his family at age seven or eight, he recalls feeling void of emotions since there was nothing he could have enjoyed by staying. His mother was dead; grandmother lived far away, and he hadn't been able to grow close to his siblings due to the early separation from their mother.

Once Douglass is removed from the plantation he is sent to Baltimore. Douglass' new mistress Mrs. Auld proves to be a kind spirit and teaches him the alphabets. Shortly after, Douglass' reading lessons are ended when Mrs. Auld's husband forbids her to teach Douglass anymore, stating that it is unlawful and unsafe to teach a slave to read. Mr. Auld continued to explain to his wife that if a slave learned to read, he would become

unmanageable, discontent, and unhappy. These words greatly impacted Douglass' train of thought. He realized that a slave equipped with the ability to reason would ultimately lead to freedom. Douglass' new master Mr. Auld inadvertently revealed the chief technique to reverse the white man's power to enslave the black race... education.

Following Mr. Auld's unintentional lesson, Douglass determined he must learn to read at any cost. Douglass befriended little white boys with the sole purpose of learning to read. He traded bread with poor white children who taught him to read in return. Douglass set out to accomplish one more goal, writing, to aid in his escape from slavery but knew it would not come easily. Douglass wittingly challenged any boy who could write by saying he could write as well as them. The unsuspecting white boys, in disbelief, urged Douglass to show his ability. Afterward Douglass, wrote down letters he had seen at a shipyard where he worked in, yet another attempt, to trick the boys. Cunningly, he asked the boys to beat what he had written to determine who the best writer was. The naïve boys unknowingly enhanced Douglass' limited writing ability, thus, assisting Douglass in the basics of learning to write.

Learning to read proved to be bittersweet. Douglass took every free moment to read. He stumbled across a book entitled *The Columbian Orator* that contained a speech denouncing slavery. The more Douglass read the more he began to understand his condition as a slave and detest his enslavers. He recalled the lesson learned from Mr. Auld that a slave who knows how to read would be discontent. At times, Douglass felt learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing because it taught him about his existence as a slave with no solution to end that state of being.

With great fervor, Douglass became determined to runaway and escape slavery. Like many other male authors, Douglass describes his battles as if they are epic tales. He encounters a struggle, has a major brawl with the assailant, and ends victoriously. As Douglass reaches manhood, he is attacked numerous times by slaver Mr. Covey but never fights back until one day Douglass decides to "become a man". Douglass seized and kicked Mr. Covey then continued to whip him for about two hours. This particular battle is the turning point of his "career" as a slave and reignites his desire to gain freedom. Douglass had several fights following this one, but he was never whipped again and on September 3, 1838 he successfully escaped slavery.

Similarly, Elie Wiesel's *Night* discusses separation, hunger, brutality, and also obtaining freedom from enslavement. In Wiesel's case, his mother and sister were separated from him and his father by an SS guard. The SS, "Schutzstaffel" or "Protective Squadron" in German, was a vast paramilitary organization that grew from beginnings as a security force for Adolf Hitler. It ran concentration camps and carried out mass killings, while its combat wing, the Waffen SS, became notorious for cruel fanaticism including the killing of prisoners of war. The SS was declared a criminal organization at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal after the war.

Although Wiesel had his father along the way to Auschwitz, he would never see his mother or sister again. Perhaps not much is discussed about women in bondage because the men and women were separated. Nevertheless, we have another highly recommended book on a subject matter that does not give insight to the particularities of women.

In a very moving account, Elie Wiesel describes the journey with his father to the most infamous concentration camp of Aushwitz. A-7713, as engraved on Wiesel's left arm, became his new identity. Elie Wiesel and his father were at Auschwitz for three weeks before being transported to Buna. It was at Buna that Wiesel began to experience the cruelty of the Holocaust. He watched his father being beaten with an iron bar by German soldiers. At that moment he realized what life in the concentration camps had done to him. Wiesel had become angry, instead of sympathetic with his father for not knowing how to avoid the brutal outbreak. Not long after, Wiesel too was beaten receiving the strokes of a whip causing him to faint.

Elie Wiesel's biggest fear was to be separated from his father. Although Wiesel had lost faith in God and no longer had a desire to live, he was adamant about keeping his father alive. While traveling through Poland, guards ordered Jews to throw out all dead bodies from the wagon. As others rejoiced at the opportunity to obtain more space on the wagon Wiesel became frantic to keep his father awake so he would not be thrown over like the others. He slapped him as hard as he could and woke his father just in time to save him. Twenty bodies were thrown off the wagon adding to the few hundred naked bodies previously disposed.

When their train departed Poland, they were given no food. Snow took the place of bread. One day when the train stopped, a workman took out a piece of bread and threw it into the wagon. Dozens of starving men savagely fought each other for a few crumbs while an audience stared.

During the selection process the weakest “prisoners” were sent to death. Wiesel’s father was aging and frail and became struck with dysentery. Invalids (sick and weak) were allowed to stay in the blocks, so Wiesel stayed behind with his father. His father begged for water. The SS guard demanded quiet, but Wiesel’s father did not hear the order and was dealt a violent blow to the head with a truncheon. Elie Wiesel stared at his father for an hour as he laid on his deathbed with a blood-stained face and shattered skull. Wiesel’s father uttered his son’s full name, *Eliezer*, which was the last word Elie Wiesel would ever hear from his father. By dawn, Elie Wiesel’s father had been moved most likely to the crematory, possibly still breathing. Wiesel and his father managed to stay together until his father’s death, in 1945, just before the Jews were freed.

Elie Wiesel’s account of the Holocaust is absolutely terrifying and deserves to be recognized as a major source for Holocaust studies. However, there is practically no insight to what women experienced by reading *Night*. This thesis will point out very specific details regarding women in the Holocaust as well as American slavery.

The incidents in Wiesel and Douglass’ books are very heartrending and both autobiographies are extremely well-written and excellent accounts of their interpretation of slavery and the Holocaust. Let there be no mistake, I am not an opponent of their work. The issue, however, is that these two books along with many other male depictions stand as the paradigm for the entire occurrence when it only represents a part of the story.

Chapter one of this thesis discusses the occurrences of the women in the Holocaust. Silence and secrecy prove to be one of the main sources of survival for the imprisoned women. This chapter illustrates the bonding of the enslaved women as well

as their methods of coping and survival. *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Women in the Holocaust* serve as a major source of reference for insight into the female Holocaust victims and demonstrate the culturally defined gender roles of Jewish men and women before the war, which equipped each sex with different skills, knowledge, and expertise.

An estimated 6 million Jews were systematically killed during the Holocaust and 40-60 million African slaves lost their lives while traveling the Middle Passage. These figures prompt comparisons as to which group suffered most. That comparison simply cannot be determined. Each group endured unique misery in its own right. The seriousness of these horrific events leads some critics to ask why it would be necessary to focus on gender. One key reason to study women in the Holocaust and American slavery is to provide a voice for victimized women and to determine commonalities and differences in their survival methods and coping styles.

A study of gender focusing on two of the most infamous events in the world's history is inventive and enlightening. On the surface, the two groups of enslaved women may not appear to have any commonalities. However, the helplessness and exploitation provide an analogous bond of their experiences.

Chapter two takes an in-depth look into the life of female slaves in America. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman* demonstrate the sexual abuse enslaved women endured. Since Southern laws did not recognize the rape of a black woman as a crime, the only alternative was to physically fight an assailant or become a victim. Those women brave enough to battle their attacker used sticks, knives, and poison to prevent rape. Furthermore, this section addresses the

value black female slaves served to ensure economic expansion once the slave trade was outlawed in 1807.

African-American women were nearly invisible in historical writing, not because there was no need or audience for black women's history. Rather, black women were ignored because few historians saw them as important contributors to America's social, economic, or political development. Author Deborah Gray White points out that there were an abundance of books on every aspect of black life highly in demand as an attempt to restore to black men the masculinity Americans had denied them. Black women's records were often deemed unauthentic because they were produced by just that, black women. Manuscripts focusing on black women were dismissed, especially if written by black women historians. In order to legitimize black women's history, black women historians, in particular, were placed in a position of having to be careful to substantiate black women's sources with those of whites and black men who primarily made black women invisible in the first place. Therefore, the need to focus on gender was and still is necessary to hear and preserve black women's thoughts and experiences.

Chapter three will concentrate on resistance to so-called Gender Studies and also comparative studies such as American slavery and the Holocaust. "Can two walk together if they do not agree?" One major issue is that many people believe one group suffered more than the other. Proponents for each side are unable to accept any similarities among the two because of their austere belief that their group suffered most. This section will examine the secret relationship between slavery and the Jews and the claim that Jews played a particularly prominent role in the enslavement of Africans in the

Americas. This secret relationship could in fact be the root of much resentment in the African-American community. Additionally, I will discuss the ways in which society views the “flourishing” of Jews and the “languishing” of blacks in America. Some would argue that Jews advanced well after the Holocaust due to reparations, whereas African-Americans, as a whole, not receiving any real reparations still remain far behind economically.

Also, I will analyze the opposing views surrounding gender-based research in Holocaust studies. One major concern is that a study on gender in the Holocaust will lessen the impact of the Nazi assault on all Jews and make the Holocaust secondary to feminism. Others fear that it might lead to odious comparisons among victims. On the other hand, feminist scholars have criticized the Holocaust establishment for ignoring the voice of women survivors.

This chapter will examine the opposition of Holocaust/African-American studies and gender studies. This section will dissect the scholarly attitudes towards the topic of concentrating primarily on women during the Holocaust and also American slavery. According to Holocaust expert Judith Tydor Baumel, there are three basic attitudes towards the juxtaposition of gender and the Holocaust: The neutral, the negative, and the positive. All three attitudes illustrate problems that scholars of the topic face in both public and the academic arenas.

The concluding chapter will further confirm my stand that bondage of any kind is immoral; however, each experience is different, especially if born as a woman. The female in bondage not only endured enslavement but also rape, forced motherhood, and

personal anguish for these abuses. The woman's virtue according to society is to be protected. Therefore, abused women dealt with the shame of having their virtue forcefully taken away. This chapter will also reiterate the importance of a study focusing on enslaved women highlighting the survival mechanisms and legacies passed to future generations. It will also provide readers with an overview of the relevant topics discussed in this thesis.

Furthermore, I will point out what readers of this work should gain from this thesis. There must be open-mindedness when conducting any research if there is going to be any major change. This study can build a greater appreciation for others' sufferings and provoke a higher interest in genocidal incidents. Moreover, using narratives as a major point of reference humanizes the incidents and forces the reader to look deep into the victims' life to gain a broader understanding of the event as a whole. This thesis should urge its readers not to be idle in current-day occurrences similar to the events addressed in this study. Finally, this study pays homage to the brutalized, raped, and murdered women in the Holocaust and American slavery whose memory will remain alive through this project.

In this work, I aim to articulate the similarities of the sufferings, coping methods, and survival techniques used by women of the Holocaust and African-American slavery rather than contrast one atrocity against the other and prove that gendered studies are vital elements to achieve comprehensive and accurate information in regards to the Holocaust and African-American research.

CHAPTER 1

A WOMAN'S WORTH

Although there are many stories about sexual abuse, they are not easy to come by. Some think it inappropriate to talk about these matters; discussions about sexuality desecrate the memories of the dead, or the living, or the Holocaust itself. For others, it is simply too difficult and painful. Still others think it may be a trivial issue. One survivor told me that she had been sexually abused by a number of Gentile men while she was in hiding, when she was about eleven years old. Her comment about this was that it 'was not important, except to me.' She meant that it had no significance within the larger picture of the Holocaust (Ringelheim, 1985).

An estimated six million Jews were systematically murdered during World War II by Nazi Germany in what is known as the Holocaust. Targeted groups such as Jews, Gypsies, Slavic (Poles, Russians, and others), people with disabilities, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses were deemed to be inferior to the Nazis. Adolph Hitler, leader of the Nazi party, blamed the decline of Germany's power on Jews. In order to prove his notion that the German or Aryan race was superior, Hitler declared the Germans as the 'Master Race'. To provide adequate living space for this race, Hitler planned to expand

Germany's border in the east, thereby, intruding on Poland and Russia at the expense of the Slavic inhabitants of those lands. According to Hitler, the Slavs were a subhuman people only fit to be slaves. In Hitler's New Order, Jews would either serve the 'master race' or be exterminated (Frank 271).

How the Holocaust is remembered is largely shaped by scholars primarily in the academic fields of history, memory, and trauma studies. The gendered differences of the Holocaust have not been addressed in many accounts until relatively recently. There are now a number of important anthologies of scholarly work which explore how Nazi ideology and practices were gendered and highlight how Jewish women whose bodies were marked by the Nazis both by their sex and their race had very specific experiences in exile, in hiding, in ghettos, in labor camps, and in death camps (Andrews 16).

Prior to the war, daily life in Nazi Germany for the Jews consisted of common activities until at least November 1938. As Jews tried to maintain their middle-class economic status and cultural standards, they began to become more vigilant of the danger surrounding them. Jewish women continued to sustain normalcy in their homes as the hostility drew near. While Nazis became more intimidating, Jews felt unsafe in their homes. They became afraid that the Gestapo (German police) would search their houses and find or plant incriminating evidence against them. Some landlords viewed Jews as dangerous or undesirable and threatened to evict them. Not only was the stability of home life jeopardized, but also food purchases were limited either by order or hostile shopkeepers.

Another indicator of how the Nazi influence had disrupted Jewish daily life was the failing relationship with non-Jewish friends, strangers, and neighbors. An early sign of this hostility was Jews being forced to wear a yellow star in order to display their orientation. Those who “looked Jewish” or even “smelled” Jewish, as Jews became known for smelling like garlic, received torment on the streets and streetcars.

According to memoirs from interviews of middle-class Jewish women conducted by Marion Kaplan, “the loss of friends and the decline of sociability in the neighborhood evidently affected Jewish women more than men, because women were more integrated into and dependent upon the community and more accustomed to neighborly exchanges and courtesies” (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 40). Those women who had been active in the community became ostracized for being Jewish. The loss of the social aspect was not as devastating for men since they had less time to engage in community activities.

To accompany segregation, unemployment began to overcome the Jewish community. Since more than half of employed Jewish women worked in businesses and commerce, many lost their jobs as family businesses and shops closed down: “Jewish sources estimated that three-quarters of Jewish women in business and trade were affected by the discriminatory laws and the anti-Jewish boycotts” (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 41). Women, however, were more adaptable than men to unemployment because they were willing to enter retraining programs at older ages. Since numerous women already possessed skills as seamstresses, domestics and milliners, it was quicker and less expensive to train them in other areas.

The banning of Jews from German universities and other institutes of higher learning restricted future job possibilities. However, certain jobs were available for young women. Although many had lost jobs in marketable fields, women under the age of thirty-five could still find other forms of work as other Jews began to emigrate.

As conditions worsened, women were relied upon to maintain the family. The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 deprived German Jews of their rights of citizenship. The laws also made it forbidden for Jews to marry or have sexual relations with Aryans (classified as a person with blond hair and blue eyes of Germanic heritage). They Nuremberg Race Laws also forbade Jews from hiring young Aryan women under age forty-five as household help. This left Jewish women to run their own household and became a major problem shopping for food in stores staffed by unfriendly workers.

From the period of 1935-1939, early restrictions became apparent as Jews tried to maintain their previous middle-class status. They became increasingly aware of the growing hostility surrounding them from the Germans. Jewish newspapers urged housewives to cut back on their tasks and adopt a tighter budget. Jewish women were also encouraged to prepare vegetarian meals because they were cheaper and healthier. Husbands were only expected to pitch in minimally, but requested to limit their expectations of their wives. Women, not only carried the greater physical burden, but also took on the psychological stress of uplifting their family's spirits until the times improved. Women were to be optimistic throughout the hardships creating a sense of denial about their difficulties and dangers.

Roles reversed between the sexes leaving women as the breadwinner partly due to the torture Jewish men might endure by the Nazis. Consequently, Jewish women took on a more assertive role in the public than ever before. Women became more unwomanly in a sense by keeping their composure when men could no longer cope. For example, one woman maintained her composure for the sake of her children as her husband sank into a deep depression (Ofer & Weitzman 44). As cherished family heirlooms were taken by the Nazis, women did not show any signs of defeat in an effort to maintain dignity for themselves and their families.

Some women recognized the worsening conditions and broke family conventions by taking over the decision-making when it became evident to them that their husbands' reluctance to leave Germany would result in even worse conditions. Men had businesses, political commitments, and World War I service that tied them to Germany. Women were not as integrated in the work world. They were more intertwined into the community where they witnessed the growing hostility first-hand.

By November of 1938 the radicalization of Nazi persecution became known as the Kristallnacht (Crystal Night). The pogrom, as Kristallnacht was also known, signified the broken glass of thousands of Jewish stores, homes, and synagogues. Jewish women's memoirs often focus on flying feathers during this incident that covered the internal space of the home. In Russia, during the pogroms, mobs tore up feather blankets and pillows and shook them into the rooms, out the windows, and in the stairways. Most women were forced to watch their homes be vandalized and their husbands beaten and dragged off to concentration camps.

Wives were told that their husbands would be released only if emigration papers were presented. A large number of men were saved by their heroic wives who somehow provided the proper documentation causing a huge exodus of married couples in 1939. The women shook the meek, gendered stereotype and organized papers, sold property, determined the destination, and organized the departure.

Following the pogrom, those Jews who remained in Germany tried desperately to leave: "In September 1939 the number of (racially defined) Jews who remained in Germany was 185,000, but this number diminished to 164,000 by October 1941. Ultimately, about half of those Jews who had lived in Germany in 1933 could save themselves through emigration to safe countries" (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 47). Women took charge of the packing and sometimes stayed behind in order to gather all of the family's belongings. Nazi rulings made the emigration process difficult with regulations such as obtaining a permit from the Finance Department, which became available only after one provided lists of all the items one wished to take.

Those women who chose not to leave Germany found a plethora of work as others fled the country. Moreover, some women stayed behind believing they would be spared harsh physical abuse, as men received, due to their gender. Another reason some women stayed behind was to care for their elderly parents as sons were encouraged to emigrate.

By September 21, 1939, the Nazis had established ghettos in order to permanently exclude Jews from Europe. German governor Hans Frank admitted that the Germans sentenced 1.2 million Jews to death by starvation. Jews were forced into a concentrated area in big cities near major railroad lines which later became known as the Jewish

ghettos. The goal of this was to drive mass departure and expulsion of Jews from all territories under German rule.

Some women recall the ways in which sex was used as a commodity in the ghettos. Sexual exchanges for food or other goods involved Nazi men as well as Jewish men. In an interview conducted by Joan Ringelheim, one Jewish woman survivor spoke of her experiences in Theresienstadt which was known as the model ghetto in Czechoslovakia. She was about twenty:

Women survived partly by brains. I worked in the office, in supply, in the education office. I wasn't doing badly ... [Up] to [a certain] point you were autonomous ... you could lead your own life ... people could get married. You survived by your male connections. It was the males who had the main offices, who ran the kitchens ... [The] *Judenrat* [was] running [the ghetto and the Jewish men] *used* it. And did they *use* it. *Did* they use it. That was how you survived as a woman-through a male. I was done in by one. I suppose I didn't sleep high enough, to put it bluntly. Because in that society, that was the only way you could survive (744).

Joan Ringelheim's interviews with female survivors of the Holocaust described the particularity of women's victimization. They discussed sexual vulnerability, sexual humiliation, rape, sexual exchange, pregnancy, abortion, and vulnerability through their children. These were concerns men either described differently or not at all. The vast majority of interviewees referred to the entrance of Auschwitz as demeaning. The

women spoke of being nude and shaved all over while standing in a sexual stance, straddling two stools and being observed by men.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that abuse characterized the entire female sexual experience during the Holocaust. Some women managed to have small romances or great loving relationships in the ghettos, camps, or resistance groups. They also acknowledged the need for companionships created out of loneliness, the need for help, and even the desire to experience sex before death. In sex-segregated camps, as strong friendships were built, sometimes lesbian relationships developed as well.

A major vulnerability women faced was coping with pregnancy. Motherhood became a specific burden to Jewish women because it made these women more susceptible to physical abuse and mental grief. Some of the issues that Jewish mothers had to struggle with were whether or not to have an abortion by choice, forced abortion, bearing a child, being killed with a child as its actual or supposed mother, bearing a child and not being able to feed it, killing a baby because its cries jeopardized other people or because if the baby were found (particularly in Auschwitz) both Jewish mother and baby would be killed (Ringelheim 746).

For Jewish women, their mere biology marked them to a complex state of existence. Due to the woman's sex, she would be vulnerable to rape, unwanted pregnancy, possible abortion, and the constant fear of genocide. Jewish women were uniquely at risk because their bodies gave birth to a people that were marked for death.

In Auschwitz, rape was very common to Jewish women. Young beautiful, healthy girls were raped until an almost unconscious state then sent to the ovens. One

survivor remembers watching SS officers go to Jewish women's homes, rape, then shoot them. This guard always came prepared with a horse-drawn hearse.

The act of rape was often ignored or neglected. According to Ruth Seifert, "rape and other abuses are another expression of male dominance: suppressing the mention of rape reinforces the marginalization and diminution of women's importance" (qtd. in Goldenberg 4). A quick survey of the indexes of Holocaust history books suggests that rape and sexuality are not a significant part of the history (Goldenberg 4). It is only in recent years through woman to woman interviews that we begin to learn about the rape in the ghettos and camps. We also learn about sex as a bargaining tool for food and shelter through these interviews. Women's silence about their victimization, according to Holocaust professor Myrna Goldenberg, "is influenced primarily by cultural norms, the need to protect oneself from painful memories, and a desire to restore one's sense of control over one's person" (4).

Although rape was not a policy of Nazi Germany, it did condone sexual abuse and humiliation. Goldenberg explains that an inherent cruel irony underlies the discussion of the rape of Jewish women by Germans and, moreover, it takes no stretch of the imagination to consider that a pervasive and persistent culture of patriarchy 'permitted' Jewish men to demand sex for food in ghettos and camps. Just as rape has extensive physical and psychological repercussions for the woman, so does sexual abuse in the form of sex for survival, though perhaps not as much. And just as rape by a friend or relative results in a profound sense of betrayal, so did abuse by a fellow Jew constitute an act of betrayal in the minds of Jewish women. While their need for food was stronger

and more elemental than their need to protect their dignity, they were nevertheless victimized and exploited by Jewish men. It must be noted that Jewish women lacked the awareness about their rights prior to the human rights and women's rights movements- this contributed to a certain amount of exploitation (Goldenberg 5).

In Nazi Germany, rape and other forms of sexual violence were not crimes. However, rassenschande or "race mixing" was a crime punishable by law. According to the Nuremburg Law of 1935, extramarital intercourse between Jews and subjects of the state of German and related blood was forbidden. Since Germans viewed Jewish women as insignificant, the act of rape was not a punishable crime. The act of race defilement, however, was viewed as treason. By 1939, the average sentence for rassenschande was four to five years for Aryans. The punishment was even harsher for Jews who were not allowed any mitigation in these circumstances. By 1943, rassenschande was one of 43 crimes punishable by death in the Reich.

From this we can conclude that rape of Jewish women by German men was trivial to the judicial system. Furthermore, rape of women in war and genocide is practically inevitable due to their gender. Goldenberg states:

Genocidal rape was not even declared a crime until after Bosnia. Rape, as an act of war, was repeated in Rwanda, largely punishable. More recently news reports from and about Darfur include descriptions of women who are raped as punishment for their Blackness and then are branded so they carry the insult to their bodies and souls publicly and irrevocably (6).

According to the Human Rights Watch, "rape, nonetheless, has long been mischarac-

terized and dismissed by military and political leaders-those in position to stop it-as a private crime, a sexual act, the ignoble act of the occasional soldier; worse still, it has been accepted precisely because it is so commonplace” (qtd. in Goldenberg 6).

For centuries the violation of women has been ignored for no good reason. There is no justification for raping women at any time. Even further, it is intolerable for the world to be aware of such conditions and idly anticipate the news of the exploited woman’s despair. Why not take immediate actions to liberate those abused women? Certainly, all people in captivity suffer but should the woman’s road be so savagely brutal and shameful?

CHAPTER 2

AREN'T I A WOMAN

I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe ... If God has bestowed beauty upon her [female slave], it will prove to be her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave (Jacobs, 1861).

From the very beginning, distinctions were made between the sexes of Africans along the middle passage. According to the 1789 Report of the Committee of the Privy Council, the female passage was distinguished from males in that women and girls were not shackled (White 63). Women took the journey on the quarter deck which made them more accessible to seamen's sexual desires. This also allowed African women to incite

and/or assist in slave insurrections at sea. One such incident occurred, in 1721, on board the *Robert* when white sailors were attacked by an enslaved woman and two men determined to become free. The woman had served as the lookout to count the number of sailors on deck. She had also stolen all the weapons used in the revolt. These courageous slaves managed to kill and injure numerous sailors. However, they did not succeed in conquering the *Robert*. As a result of the slave woman's role in organizing the insurrection, she was hung by her thumbs, whipped and slashed with knives until she died.

In 1785, a similar incident occurred when a group of women attempted to throw a captain overboard. Subsequently, he was rescued by his crew. The women tried to escape by throwing themselves down the hatchway. Some women died from injuries, others starved themselves to death. Perhaps women were not shackled due to the belief that men could overpower seamen. The highest demand was for male slaves. They were crammed in spoon fashion at the bottom of ships in vile conditions to be sold for large profits. Women were not in as high demand as men. In fact, women were requested on the basis of one woman to every two men (White 64).

The earlier years of slavery relied mostly upon black males. Black men outnumbered black women from 1658 to 1730 from around one and one half to one (White 64). The sex ratio evened out between 1730 and 1750 when the first African-American women began bearing children. These African-American mothers began childbearing earlier and more frequently than their African mothers, also producing more female children.

Once the sexes became even, slaveholders realized the reproductive function of the female slave could become exceptionally lucrative (White 68). As a result, slaveholders began to manipulate the sexual relations of slaves in an effort to produce more slaves. Furthermore, after congress outlawed the overseas importation of slaves in 1807 slave traders made the slave woman's sexuality a primary concern in order to maximize their profits which depended on their slave woman having many children (White 68). More than one-fifth of black women in the fifteen to forty-four age range bore a child each year. Statistically speaking, this factor points to a major difference between male and female bondage. Male slavery centered mainly on the work that black men did for whites. Female slavery had much to do with work, but much of it was concerned with bearing, nourishing, and rearing children whom slaveholders needed for the continual replenishment of their labor force (White 69).

While being used as breeders, black women became burdened with childbearing and childrearing duties. Consequently, women were not as inclined to runaway as their male counterparts. Studies of fugitive slaves reveal that the majority of runaways were men. A recorded seventy-seven percent of runaways advertised in colonial South Carolina during the 1730s were men (White 70). The same trend existed across other parts of the south. Some of the reasons women were less likely to runaway was due to childrearing. Most runaways were between sixteen and thirty-five years old. Women this age were typically pregnant, nursing an infant or had a small child to care for (White 70). Another factor deterring women from running away was concern for their children's

welfare. Although fugitive men cared for their offspring, they could not nurse an infant as a mother could.

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides a harrowing account of the specific abuse endured by slave women from their masters. In this memoir Jacob's uses the pseudonym Linda Brent to protect her identity from slave catchers while describing numerous unwanted sexual advances from her master. Jacobs hid for seven years before running away to the north. Her autobiographical account offers a voice for enslaved women conveying a historical authentic legacy. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was written and published in 1861 after Jacobs escaped slavery.

Linda Brent was harassed by her obsessive, lustful master and purposely became pregnant by another man to dissuade his advances towards her. Becoming an unwed mother was a very drastic act for Brent who possessed very high moral standards and cherished her chastity. Brent, however, had given up on the belief that a slave woman could be considered virtuous:

O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! I wanted to remain pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair (Jacobs 48).

Linda Brent devised a plan to escape slavery that involved her children being sold. If her plan was successful, Brent's children would have been bought and freed by their white father. However, if the plan failed, Brent faced severe beatings, a lifetime of enslavement and indefinite sexual harassment/abuse from her master. Furthermore, Brent was certain her master would eventually be successful forcing himself on her and ultimately impregnating her. This perhaps was Linda Brent's greatest fear since she had "seen several women sold off with babies at their breast... [Master] never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife" (Jacobs 49). For a woman as virtuous as Brent, losing her purity outside of marriage was mental anguish but the desire to gain an ounce of revenge on her master far outweighed her shame. Undoubtedly, Brent's master would be furious that she had an interest in someone other than him, even though she never gave him any indication she was even the least bit fond of him. Author and scholar of African-American studies, Brenda Stevenson, asserts:

Black women viewed their own resistance to rape, to the sale of their children, to the white woman's never-ending and often petty demands, as proof of their moral superiority to white women. In fact, the pride and esteem they had for women who resisted openly-who fought off rapists, who refused to be whipped, who verbally assaulted masters and mistresses-revealed their reverence for heroism and their celebration of it as a feminine trait. They did not see aggression and independent behavior as unfeminine, but a means to protect their most fundamental claims to

womanhood; ... their female sexuality and physicality, and their roles as mothers and wives (Stevenson 236).

Brent's master began the task of building her a cottage to "make a lady out of her" although he was already married. Rumors began to surface about Brent and her master causing much grief from the master's wife who was overflowing with jealousy. Brenda Stevenson, points out that "enslaved women saw even the most compassionate white women as 'unholy' and 'unchristian' because the power they wielded forced enslaved women to hide their real selves-forced them to steal food, feign illnesses, and participate in all kinds of covert activities" (Stevenson 236).

Linda Brent reached a heightened level of desperation which caused her to befriend a white gentleman interested in her. After Brent's second child was born by the gentleman, she went into hiding. Brent determined her children would be sold if she escaped from the plantation. Eventually Brent's master sold her children in hopes that she would resurface upon hearing the news of her children's fate. The children were purchased by their white father as Brent had planned and allowed to continue living with their great-grandmother.

Although Brent's plan was successful, she suffered unspeakable, severe anguish while in hiding. For seven years she remained trapped in a small shed attached to her grandmother's house. The space she occupied was filled with darkness, extreme heat or cold depending on the season and room only large enough for her to crawl gaining very minimal exercise. Brent acknowledges her life as a slave was not considered difficult by

white people, but she chose wholeheartedly to remain imprisoned in the hiding space provided to her until she could safely escape to the north.

According to Deborah Gray White, history professor and co-director for Historical Analysis at Rutgers University, slave women would probably have escaped more often if they could have done so with their husbands, and offspring but children, in particular, made the journey more difficult than it already was and increased the chances of capture (80). Linda Brent, for instance, fled slavery without her children and was plagued with guilt until she was eventually reunited with them in New York.

Slave women also suffered illnesses associated with childbirth and the menstrual cycle. Virginia bondwomen probably lost more time from work for menstrual pain, discomfort, and disorders than for any other cause (qtd. in White 83). Along with menstrual pains, some slave women experienced amenorrhea (lack of menstrual flow), abnormal bleeding between cycles and abnormal discharges (resulting from conditions such as gonorrhea, tumors, and prolapsed uterus). Although white women were more likely to die due to complications of pregnancy, slave women suffered tremendously during childbirth (White 83). According to Deborah Gray White, “convulsions, retention of placenta, ectopic pregnancy, breech presentation, premature labor, and uterine rigidity were among the difficulties [women] faced (84). Additionally, birthing was complicated by unsanitary practices of midwives and physicians who delivered numerous children in the course of a day without washing their hands (84). As a result, outbreaks of puerperal (child bed) fever were rampant. The infections of the reproductive organs were often fatal (84).

Female slaves were sometimes accused of exaggerating the extent of pain endured as it relates to “women’s sickness”. Conceivably, bondwomen practiced passive resistance by using methods of birth control and abortion. Deborah Gray White asserts “these matters were virtually exclusive to the female world of the quarters, and when they arose they were attended to in secret and were intended to remain secret” (84). Some whites suspected slave women knew how to avoid and abort pregnancy. It was believed that bondwomen who repeatedly miscarried used abortifacts such as herbs of tansy and rue, the roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries, and camphor, either in gum or spirits (85). There may have been reasonable doubt for these abortions. For example, “an 1869 South Carolina court case revealed that a slave woman sold as ‘unsound’ and barren in 1857 had three children *after* emancipation.”(qtd. in White 85). On another occasion, “a bondwoman refused to have children because her master forced her to marry someone she did not like. After she was sold and found someone of her own choosing, she had ten children” (qtd. in White 85). The record of self-imposed sterility and self-imposed miscarriages is unclear and could have resulted from strenuous work causing barrenness or abortion.

Whether births were intentionally aborted or not, slave women certainly had good reason not to desire parenthood. Not only was the act of bearing children life-threatening, but it would also trap a mother from escaping slavery, thus it extended the cycle of slavery. Additionally, slave women became burdened with constant fear that their children would be sold whenever the master saw fit. Although motherhood was a

heavy burden there were some slave women who got pregnant to avoid working in the field.

Deborah Gray White points out that while slavery was terrible for both sexes, there are vital differences that should be recognized:

Female slave bondage was not better or worse, or more or less severe, than male bondage, but it was different. From the very beginning of a woman's enslavement she had to cope with sexual abuse, abuse made legitimate by the conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels. Work assignments also structured female slave life so that women were more confined to the boundaries of the plantation than were men. The most important reason to differentiate between male and female bondage, however, was the slave woman's childbearing and child care responsibilities. These affected the female slave's pattern of resistance and figured prominently in her general health (89-90).

The female life cycle varied from each plantation; however, there were some general characteristics shared by bondwomen. Women began understanding their role as child bearers at the beginning of menses. Since the sexes completed the same tasks as children, gender roles were not defined. Girls and boys "toted" water to thirsty field hands, tended to babies, and played the same types of games such as jump rope or tag.

In the teen years, differences in the sexes become more noticeable as girls go from wearing the same type of homespun shirts as boys to dresses. The slave mother now faces anxiety that her daughter will soon be violated by one of the men on the

plantation. Slave mothers often trained their daughters to be coy in terms of “courting”. Some slave mothers also withheld details regarding childbirth. Mississippian Frances Fluker claimed: “I come a woman ‘fore I knowed what it was...They didn’t tell me nothin’ (qtd. in White 96). Another woman noted that during her adolescence, she and another girl searched parsley beds and hollow logs looking for newborn babies (White 96).

Although slave mothers attempted to keep their daughters ignorant about reproduction, they could not remain sheltered for very long. Slave masters wanted adolescent girls to have children to increase their wealth. In a cunning fashion, masters encouraged young slaves to pursue lasting relationships. Some slave masters, as an incentive, agreed to occasional visitations from neighboring plantations. On some instances, the slave master would purchase a slave so that a man and woman could marry and live together.

Once married, the female slave’s life was not much different than her life as a single person. Her primary duty as a woman was to bear as many children as possible. The birth of children provided some sense of security for the married couple but could prove to be unpredictable in the event of a master’s death. Should a master die the entire family could be sold off and permanently separated. Or perhaps, a slave woman’s husband might die while she was still in childbearing years. In either circumstance, the slave woman was expected to immediately find another spouse and have more children. The master was not concerned with a proper grieving period for the bereaved slave

woman. His only concern was to increase productivity on the plantation and make more money at her expense.

In the event of a spouse's death, the slave woman would be "graciously" provided with a new mate if she did not promptly find another (White 103). If the grief-stricken slave woman refused to accept the chosen slave man as her companion, she received lashings from the master until she changed her mind. As a result of slaveholders' manipulation of young black women, many young slave girls found themselves in search of a husband whether they loved him or not in order to satisfy the master and minimize abuse.

Once a slave woman became pregnant, she grew more dependent mainly on women. Pregnant women along with elderly, nursing, and other pregnant women were somewhat isolated in terms of the work they performed. These women bonded as they sewed, weaved, or spun cloth. Older women advised soon-to-be mothers to adopt a restrictive diet for herself and to wear some kind of charm or to perform certain rituals (White 111). Such precautions were taken to protect the fetus or to ensure the newborn was not "marked" in any way (111). For instance, one midwife insisted that her patient put a spoonful of whiskey in her left shoe every morning to keep evil spirits from harming the unborn child" (111).

Childbirth for a woman, black or white, in the nineteenth-century was hazardous. Yet, slave owners determined the degree of attention a pregnant slave woman received would be minimal. Although many slaveholders increased the slave woman's allotment of food and decreased her workload, she was still neglected: "It was widely believed by

whites that slave women gave birth more easily and quickly than white women, and thus needed less attention during pregnancy and labor” (White 112). According to a conversation with slaveholder Frederick Olmsted and a planter along the Mississippi River, “female slaves got so much exercise in their field work they ‘were not subject to the difficulty, danger and pain which attended women of the better classes in giving birth to their offspring’. He, therefore, seldom employed a physician” (qtd. in White 112).

Women who were whipped or forced to do hard labor during pregnancy typically faced extreme complications, as did those who were sent back to the fields too soon after delivery. Around the first two or three weeks after delivery new slave mothers were put to spinning, weaving, or sewing and pressured to promptly finish the assignment even with a suckling baby at their breast. Child care was very frustrating for mothers. If the mother did not complete her task, she was whipped. Once the slave mother returned to the fields, she would have to go out in the mornings with the rest of the slaves, come home, nurse the children, and go back to the field. She would then stay two or three hours, then go back to the field and stay two or three more hours until she had to nurse again. Then she would go back to the field and stay there until night. Needless to say, the slave woman was so cruelly mistreated!

By the end of childbearing years, around age thirty-nine or forty, the slave woman was introduced to a new dimension of ill-treatment. After so many years of childbearing and childrearing, instead of receiving some form of compensation for her role in the seemingly perpetuity of slavery, the slave woman is worked more intense than ever before. She is too aged to birth children but many years shy of old age. The middle-aged

slave woman could not rely on the occasional break pregnancy provided. During this middle-aged period, field labor was difficult to differentiate by gender. Slave owners who had already reaped the profits of the slave woman's offspring had not a scruple regarding the slave woman's mistreatment.

The slave woman's status only seemed to rise once becoming elderly. In her old age, slave women were often called upon to assist in medical duties in the slave community. She also became a primary caretaker for children. Slave women played an instrumental role in the slave community. They were likely present at all slave births and slave deaths. Their life experiences assisted in bringing one into life, coping through life's tribulations, and possibly helping one to an early grave. "As midwife and doctor they embodied the link between the generations. And, it was partly through them that a central aspect of black culture-the secret of the herbs-was transmitted" (White 116).

Although elderly slave women garnered respect from the slave community, "at no stage in her life cycle was the plantation slave woman totally immune to the brutality of the system" (White 118). Some old slave women were viewed as a burden by the whites and could be left in seclusion to starve to death. On many instances, the elderly slave woman was left at the mercy of her children, other relatives, or slaves who respected and valued the seasoned slave woman enough to share their meager rations.

African-American female slaves, through their sexuality, sustained the very lucrative business of slavery. They were auctioned off in their nudity to prove they could birth more slaves for greedy slave owners. Moreover, black women were oftentimes trapped into motherhood by rape, causing many to lose possible opportunities for

freedom. Even those women who were not raped were pressured by their master to start families and produce children to ensure the perpetuity of slavery. The humiliation and abuse African-American slaves endured were indeed brutal, but the female experience requires specific consideration.

CHAPTER 3

RESISTENCE TO EXPLORE

What can be gained by drawing literary comparisons between the African Diaspora experience of slavery and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust? Can such comparisons be made without distorting the historical record? (Zierler, 2004).

Comparisons among African-American slavery and the Holocaust seem to create uneasiness among even the most intellectual individuals. Undoubtedly, both experiences were far from the same; however, women's issues in bondage and overall cruelty to mankind always share some similarities. Toni Morrison's dedication in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved...to Sixty Million and More* refers to the captured Africans who died coming across the Atlantic Ocean on the infamous Middle Passage. "In one of the few critical reviews of *Beloved* the African-American conservative critic Stanley Crouch condemns Morrison for elevating [a] 'catastrophic experience,' promoting a 'vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims,' and representing African-American history in terms of the Holocaust" (qtd. in Zierler). According to Crouch, "*Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface Holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a

contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experiences of Jews at the hands of the Nazis” (qtd. in Zierler).

Many critics have dismissed Crouch’s critique entirely as *Beloved* was a very successful novel. Crouch’s commentary, however, did draw more attention to *Beloved* as a Holocaust novel, an idea supported by some of Morrison’s own comments (Zierler 47). In an interview with Time magazine, Morrison referred to sixty million as the “smallest number I got from anybody” for the number of Africans who died as a result of the Middle Passage (Zierler 47). Wendy Zierler, associate professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies explains that in other interviews, “Morrison revealed a preoccupation with the Holocaust, as well as an element of competitive comparison” (47). When Morrison was asked what she would write were she requested to compose the jacket copy for *Beloved*, she answered:

I’m not trying to explore how a people – in this case one individual or a small group of individuals – absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something [slavery] that is indigestible and unabsorbable completely. Something that has no precedent in the history of the world, in terms of the length of time and nature of and specificity of its devastation. If Hitler had won the war and established his thousand year Reich, at some point he would have stopped killing people, the ones he didn’t want around, because he would have needed some to do the labor for nothing. And the first 200 years of that Reich would have been exactly what that period was in this country for black people. It would

have been just like that. Not for five years, but for 200 years or more (qtd. in Zierler 47).

Morrison's response challenges the notion that the Holocaust should be recognized as the greater evil. Her comments clearly demonstrate that slavery, in fact, is worthy of more acknowledgment than typically received based on, if nothing else, the length of time African people were enslaved. Furthermore, Morrison, by pointing out the fact that American slavery lasted for two-hundred years versus the five-year long Holocaust draws an obvious comparison of the suffering.

So how can one compare suffering? This question cannot garner a simple answer. Perhaps this is the cause of such passionate debates regarding the comparison of American slavery to the Holocaust. Supporters of the Holocaust would likely agree that no single event in history can compare to Adolph Hitler's attempt to exterminate an entire race. On the other hand, those in favor of the recognition of American slavery would argue there is no comparison of two-hundred years of slavery to five years of the Holocaust or the loss of sixty million Africans along the Middle Passage to six million Jews exterminated. There is simply no easy way to address this issue. Must there always be a negative comparison of the African American experience and that of the Jewish people?

Laurence Mordekhai Thomas, professor of Philosophy and Political Science, asserts in his book *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* that "there can be no true understanding of a people without a proper grasp of its moral pain...The moral pain of neither [group] can be subsumed under nor assimilated into the moral pain of the

other” (Thomas Preface X). According to Thomas, writing about both experiences in the same work only deepens our understanding of evil itself by looking at both without surreptitiously attempting to show that one was worse than the other (7).

American Enterprise Institute resident scholar Joshua Muravchik points out that during the civil-rights revolution in the late 1950’s and early 60’s, “the front-line troops in the Montgomery bus boycott and then lunch-counter sit-ins were all blacks, but among the whites who soon rallied to the cause, a large share – disproportionate share – were Jews” (26). Additionally, Jews made up one-third to one-half of the white volunteers who took part in the “Mississippi Summer Project” which was created and organized by a Jew, Allard Lowenstein (Muravchik 26). During this project, two of the three young volunteers killed (Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman), were Jews. The third, James Chaney, was black (Muravchik 26).

With that stated, what happened to the Black-Jewish alliance? The decline of their relationship lies largely in economics. While Jews have vastly gained strong financial stability in the United States, African Americans have seemingly languished. According to James Baldwin, “blacks have resented the Jewish shopkeepers, and not many landlords, grew rich off the ghetto in the past, and fewer still returned after they were burned out in the urban riots of the 1960’s” (qtd. in Muravchik 28). Baldwin also argued “that while Christians make up America’s true power structure, the Jew was ‘doing their dirty work... [stating that] Jewish financial support of civil-rights organizations [was] mere ‘conscience money’” (qtd. in Muravchik 27).

Another factor for the rift among African Americans and Jews is the belief that Jews played a prominent role in the slave trade. Tenured Africana Studies professor in Wellesley College, Tony Martin, asserted that, “Jews were very much in the mainstream of European society as far as the trade in African human beings was concerned” (qtd. in Jordan 109). Martin also added that in regards to slave ownership by Jews: “Using the research of Jewish historians, the book [*The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* published by The Nation of Islam, 1992] suggests that based on the 1830 census, Jews actually had a higher per capita slave ownership than the white population as a whole” (qtd. in Jordan 109).

A lack of reparations for blacks also contributes to animosity among African Americans and Jews. African Americans endured close to 250 years of domestic enslavement in addition to state-mandated segregation known as Jim Crow Laws following slavery. Additionally, African American descendents have not received an appropriate compensation for their continual suffering as other ethnic groups. Robert Westley, who wrote *Many Billions Gone: Is it Time to Reconsider the Case for Reparations?*, addresses the paradox:

Blacks have never received any group compensation for the crime of slavery imposed upon them by the people and government of the United States. As in the case of the Japanese, Jews received not only material compensation for their losses, but their victimization was also publicly memorialized in Germany, Israel, and the United States (even though there was no legitimate claim of oppression or genocide that Jewish survivors of

the Holocaust might assert against the United States). The only ‘memorial’ dedicated to the suffering of black slaves and the survivors of slavery in the United States is contained in a series of legislative enactments passed after the Civil War. The history of black Reconstruction shows how these enactments were successively perverted by the courts, and by Congress itself (qtd. in Darity & Frank 326).

At the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), the transatlantic slave trade was declared a crime against humanity. Simultaneously, the United States government evaded a warranted claim by African Americans for compensation for the enslavement of their ancestors (Darity & Frank 326). The disregard for support of African Americans stands to be quite out of character for a government that prides itself in providing other groups who have suffered wrongs.

The U.S. government has indeed undertaken numerous reparations payments to Native American tribes for atrocity and treaty violations (Darity & Frank 326). According to Dorothy Benton, author of *Black Reparations Now*, “two examples [of the U.S. providing reparations to groups besides blacks] include the 1971 grant of \$1 billion and 44 million acres of land to Alaskan natives, and the 1986 grant of \$32 million to the Ottawa tribe of Michigan” (qtd. in Darity & Frank 326). Additionally, Benton points out “in 1990, the U.S. government issued a formal apology to Japanese-Americans subjected to internment during World War II and made a \$20,000 payment to each of 60,000 identified victims” (326). Robert Westley describes the reparations given to Jewish people:

In a non-USA precedent the 1952 German Wiedergutmachung established group-based indemnification for Jewish people worldwide in the aftermath of Nazi persecution. Compensation included payment of more than \$800 million to "... the State of Israel, on behalf of the half million victims of the Nazis who had found refuge in its borders, and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, on behalf of the victims of Nazi persecution who had immigrated to countries other than Israel (qtd. in Darity & Frank 326).

The aforementioned occurrences lead some to believe the United State's government does not categorize American slavery along with Jim Crow and modern-day racial discriminations as significant. Understandably, African Americans should feel somewhat slighted with the overall response, or lack there of, pertaining to slavery. After all, blacks born into slavery on United States soil were completely displaced not only physically from Africa but also from African culture and traditions whereas Jews continue to prosper financially and practice their traditions such as Bar Mitzvahs. Nonetheless, one tragedy does not outweigh the other and in terms of research, each group is deserving of equal attention.

Laurence Mordekhai Thomas provides an excellent example dispelling the notion that suffering can be measured in acts of evil:

If the same institution of evil is visited upon two different peoples simultaneously, all things being equal with the exception of the number of lives lost, then we do indeed have a basis for allowing loss of life to be an

indication of the magnitude of the evil suffered. The Holocaust and American slavery, however, are not various ways of referring to the same institution, but two entirely different evil institutions. Accordingly, the painful truth that the Holocaust posed a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people does not, thereby, make it worse than American slavery. Nor, does the greater number of deaths among blacks under American slavery than among Jews in the Holocaust of itself warrant the conclusion that the former was worse than the latter (11).

The researcher's claim, then, is that although American slavery and the Holocaust are two separate events and judged differently, the female experience in bondage, sharing several similarities, requires special consideration. Why, then, is it that some critics argue that gender should not be accounted for when discussing, in particular, the Holocaust? According to Joan Ringelheim, the importance of the study of gender during the Holocaust was not widely accepted (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 346). Ringelheim recalls, as recent as December 1993 during the opening conference for the Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where sixteen of the eighteen panel members were women, the discussion of women and/or gender was omitted (346). When the panel was asked about the omission, the answer provided was "We forgot", although, the issue of gender had been proposed to the planning committee (346). The idea that focusing on gender trivializes the atrocities of the Holocaust is perhaps why women's experiences have gone unnoticed for so long.

One argument against the study of women during the Holocaust claims that by separating the study of men and women “scholars are playing into the hands of Holocaust-deniers by erasing the idea of a collective Jewish fate” (Baumel 199). Other opponents claim that “gender studies of the Holocaust are historically inaccurate because they ‘grind the feminist axe’, making Jewish suffering secondary to what is being portrayed as universal female suffering and giving the impression that Hitler had targeted women and not Jews” (Baumel 199).

In response to the first argument, scholars of gender and of the Holocaust stated, “that the ultimate Jewish fate of men and women may have been identical, but their experiences and perspectives before meeting this fate were different and deserve separate recognition and study” (qtd. in Baumel 199). Additionally, “gender researchers pointed to the numerous studies that had no feminist political bias but simply described and analyzed women’s Holocaust experiences, behavior, writings or representations from a gendered perspective in response to the second argument” (qtd. in Baumel 199).

Another issue that arose was once scholars decided to explore women in the Holocaust, the researching began to shift to teaching in the mid-1990s which would require courses with syllabi and bibliographies. However, only a minimal number of academic studies dealing with women during the Holocaust could be found on university library shelves (qtd. in Baumel 200). So until collected historical studies about women during the Holocaust were published in the mid – to late 1990’s historians prepared reading list combined with several disciplines such as history, sociology, or literature which was frowned upon by strict historians in dismay of the combination (Baumel 200).

Holocaust scholar Judith Tydor Baumel believes there are three broad categories that peak scholars' interest about the Holocaust and gender studies. One category focuses on issues relevant to men's and women's lives during the Holocaust such as sabotage methods used against Germans (202). For instance, in Baumel's 1980s study of men and women who were a part of the 'Canada Commando' (a group responsible for sorting possessions of inmates), shared an idea of sabotage by using different tactics (202). Women, when coming across coats to be shipped to Germany, inserted handwritten notes into the pockets that read "German women, know that you are wearing a coat that belonged to a woman who has been gassed to death in Auschwitz" (202). Men, on the other hand, used a more overt strategy. The men ripped the lining and seams of the coats to shreds so they would fall off as soon as the German recipient put it on (202).

A second category of interest to scholars according to Baumel are those issues that are collectively considered women's issues such as pregnancy, birth and motherhood (203). This particular subject can often be overlooked because of scholars' preconceived belief that they are already familiar with the topic. Baumel provides an interesting example to further explain the misconception:

Various historical studies mention motherly sacrifices during the Holocaust, and focus on mothers who chose to accompany their children to death so they would not be alone during their last moments on earth. However, it appears that there were mothers who acted otherwise, as described by the Polish non-Jewish Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz in his autobiographical collection *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*,

first published in Polish in 1947. During the selections at Auschwitz certain young mothers hid from their children in an attempt to buy themselves a few additional days or possible hours of life by not being sent automatically with their children to death (Baumel 203).

A third category of interest includes those arguments that scholars credit men's achievements more than women's in Holocaust studies. By adopting a broader meaning for the term "Jewish community" it is possible to include women and find those who played a prominent role in pre-war and wartime (Baumel 204). Increasingly, women found themselves as breadwinner and family protector. They began defending their husbands, sons and other male family members. There are many accounts of women who saved family members from the Gestapo (German police). Initially, women were able to manipulate the German system to some extent as the Nazis tortured men but not women. During the pre-war stage women took a more assertive role in the public than ever before.

Some women took responsibility for their entire family often acting in an 'unwomanly' manner. The testimonies of both men and women emphasize women's calm state in the midst of turmoil (Ofer & Weitzman 45). It was the strength of women that maintained the Jewish family in times of struggle.

So "can two walk together if they do not agree" in terms of gender studies and the Holocaust (Baumel 204)? It is the researcher's belief, along with Judith Baumel and Laurence Mordekhai Thomas, with regards to the Holocaust and American slavery, "that there is no place for such a question" (Baumel 204). As so eloquently stated by Baumel,

“all topics can ‘walk together’ if permitted to do so naturally, and not be prodded incessantly by a particular political, social, or religious agenda” (204).

CONCLUSION

The research has proven that there are similarities in the sufferings, coping methods, and survival techniques used by women of the Holocaust and African-American female slaves. Both groups of women faced sexual exploitation and the burden of motherhood. Female captivity, regardless of race, tends to be dominated and defined by sexuality. The intricacies of female bondage have been overlooked in many literary works leaving only a limited number of studies that emphasize women's struggles. Therefore, this thesis provides a voice for the female experience. Furthermore, it allows readers to examine two groups of people with disregard to race.

So, what should be gained from such a comparison? Readers of this thesis will obtain a more in-depth knowledge of women's sufferings. Also, they will be able to view the African-American and Jewish struggle side-by-side versus putting one against the other. Additionally, this thesis will build upon the literary canon for women's studies providing further documentation that women were in fact significant to each atrocity.

The idea that African-American women and Jewish women have similarities, to some, is astonishing. As seen throughout this work, both groups of women were sexually humiliated, assaulted, and burdened due to their gender. It is also imperative to note that some mothers were troubled by social expectations of a female's role. African-American women were often hindered from escaping slavery because societal roles required a

mother to rear children while fathers were acceptably absent. For Jewish women child rearing determined life or death. Something as simple as a crying baby may have marked a sooner death for the mother and child. The Jewish mother faced the difficult choice to either kill her baby and silence the cries or be sent to gas chambers upon the child's discovery. These circumstances, obviously, are specific to the woman's experience.

The classic male narrative lacks an adequate discussion of issues particular to women, and therefore, do not provide a broad enough explanation of the Holocaust or American slavery. The exclusion of women from the master texts excludes significant stories from historical records, thus providing a misrepresentation of the atrocities as a whole.

Some may argue that rape, pregnancy, and motherhood are typical elements of a woman's life. Conversely, such a statement minimizes the actual crime committed against the victim. As a result, women in bondage adopted the attitude that their self-worth was insignificant which sometimes led them to use sex as a bargaining tool. On average, though, sex was vehemently seized.

Laurence Mordekhai Thomas points out an important fact regarding the abuse of Jewish women:

As with slavery and the notion of moral simpleton, a parallel question can be raised: Is the idea of the Jew as irredeemably evil compatible with the sexual exploitation of Jewish women by Nazis? Not surprisingly, I say that it is. Strictly speaking, of course, the Nazis prohibited sexual relations between Jews and "pure" Germans. Then concentration camps

nevertheless allowed sexual relations of any nature with Jews, and Nazis were undeterred in practicing the basest form of sexual exploitation. There is no incompatibility between ideology and practice in sexually exploiting that which is vile, as a reminder of the vileness (124).

This type of exploitation and hypocrisy can also be seen in the relationship between the slave master and the female African-American slave. While the female slave is considered sinful and promiscuous, it was in fact the slave owner who violates her with forced sex while presenting himself as a righteous Christian.

For black women, one of the most prevalent images in antebellum America was that of the Jezebel. This was an image of a very promiscuous woman lacking moral indiscretions. White Americans, southerners in particular, created this image in their initial contact with Africans. The idea of black women as extraordinary sexual beings originated when Englishmen went to Africa to buy slaves. Ignorant to the norms of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook semi nudity for lewdness (White 29). Furthermore, “they misinterpreted African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to the Africans’ uncontrolled lust, tribal dances were reduced to the level of orgy, and African religions lost the sacredness that had sustained generations of ancestral worshippers” (White 29).

Many southern white men were convinced that black women were lustful and any resistance for intimacy with them was purely an act of feigning. Additionally, the stereotype of Jezebel was supported by the number of births in the slave population. The natural increase of the black race was necessary to sustain the system of slavery

therefore, slave women were pressured or outright forced to conceive as many offspring as possible.

Black women were also degraded on the auction block. In a civilization where prudery and piety defined womanhood, black women were stripped of the least amount of decency. While being auctioned off, slave traders would often demand slave women to expose their breasts and other private parts to prove they were worthy to be purchased. Occasionally, if there was doubt that the slave woman could not produce children, she would be taken off to a room and examined by a physician.

In addition to the physical abuse endured by black women, many were also tormented by internalizing the notion that they were unworthy of being virtuous women. As stated by Linda Brent on this matter, “[slave women were] not allowed to have any pride of character. It [was] deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” (Jacobs 29). Brent, as previously addressed, gave up her dream to be virtuous by becoming pregnant in a desperate attempt to end her master’s advances towards her.

In contrast to African-American women, Jewish women were viewed as dangerous to the Nazis because of their ability to carry on the race. To the Nazis, Jewish women were regarded not as only Jews but specifically as Jewish women. As a result of their gender, they were sometimes punished instantaneously. Jewish women made up 60-70% of those gassed in the first selections for death (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 348).

For Jews, the final solution of extermination was the same for both sexes, but the road to the end took a notably different path. Whether in hiding or in concentration camps, women were raped. For instance, one woman was taken into hiding and recalled

being as afraid of rape as she was of the Germans (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 343). They were expected to be grateful if rescued from the Germans. Jewish women, like African-American slave women, internalized the belief that their abuse was customary. One female Jewish survivor stated:

In respect of what happened, [what we] suffered and saw- the humiliation in the ghetto, seeing our relatives dying and taken away [as well as] my friends,...then seeing the ghetto...burn and seeing people jumping out and burned- is this [molestation] important? It is only important to me at the moment. It is past, gone...What I want to say is that it is not the most important part of my life. When the war was over...this fear disappeared (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 343).

The “final solution” called for extermination of every Jewish man, woman, child, even other groups as homosexuals and gypsies. No class or profession could save a Jewish person from being killed. Therefore, the Holocaust has been given a gender-neutral grouping, thus, erasing gender as a category for analysis. This provides some insight as to why studies emphasizing gender are seen as irrelevant.

Although Jewish women’s experiences are documented in the Oral History Department and Archives at the United States Holocaust Museum, there is still disinclination to include women’s stories throughout the remainder of The Permanent Exhibition (U.S. Holocaust Museum). Joan Ringelheim expresses her thoughts concerning the resistance:

I think that these contemporary examples point to the general reluctance to explore the questions about gender, including sexual exploitation amid the other horrors of the Holocaust- whether because it is thought to be trivial in comparison with genocide per se or because it is thought to be banal, or because it is too close to what we know in everyday life (qtd. in Ofer & Weitzman 349).

Men and women in the Holocaust and American slavery endured suffering, but it was the women who bore the burden of sexual victimization, pregnancy, abortion, childbirth, care of children, and decisions regarding separation from children. So why would gendered suffering be treated as a trivial matter? Perhaps the notion that women's issues are not as relevant as those of men prevent a comprehensive impartial study of women. Regardless of the prejudices that keep women underrepresented, the fact still remains these incidents did occur and in order to preserve and document the voice of women, studies such as this thesis are essential. Gendered studies are vital elements to achieve wide-ranging accurate information in regards to the Holocaust and African-American research.

African-Americans and Jewish people have been viewed by the oppressor as being "backwards" and being "heathens" (Sterba 435). Laurence Mordekhai Thomas notes that blacks were regarded as "moral simpletons" during slavery, and Jews as "irredeemably evil" by the Nazis (125). With that said, Thomas explains the characteristics of a moral simpleton as: one that is simpleminded and possibly lazy (124). Simpleminded individuals appear to lack the ability to be evil. So that suggests there

should be obvious differences in these institutions. Thomas states that “while a society might very well have some use for moral simpletons, it is not at all clear what use a society could have for the irredeemably evil” (125). According to the “irredeemably evil” stereotype Jews have been thought to have a vice of character that is relentless in the acquisition of money by their very nature, even a poor Jew (Thomas 124).

Consequently, concluding that one institution was worst than the other based on the extermination of a people should be resisted. After all, “how one survives makes all the difference in the world...It is simply false that surviving is always rationally preferable to death” (Thomas 125). African-Americans, although not sent to the gas chambers as Jews, lived over two-hundred years of brutalization, lynching, and rape followed by Jim Crow segregation and, still today, racial profiling accompanied by police brutality. So what we see now is Jews prospering while blacks seemingly have languished. Thomas offers an explanation for this, “there is natal alienation in the lives of an ethnic group when the social practices of the society into which they are born forcibly prevent most of them from fully participating in, and thus having secure knowledge of their historical-cultural traditions” (150). Since Jews were not natively alienated, they maintained their historical-cultural traditions enabling Jews to be “socially unencumbered” to flourish in ways that blacks because of their natal alienation from birth, were unable to do (qtd. in Sterba 437).

Viewing the African-American and Jewish experiences together in one work allows readers to look at two of the world’s most infamous atrocities and discover

common ground. By focusing on the particularities of women we acquire a more enhanced ideology of captivity. We learn further that cruelty has no depth.

The effects of the institution of slavery and the Holocaust are monumental. The two aforementioned groups carry the shame of their past but have made excellent strides toward advancement. Jewish people managed to flourish following the Holocaust whereas African-Americans improved but still struggle, as a whole, for economic empowerment.

This thesis encourages an appreciation for others sufferings. The use of narratives humanizes the incidents and stimulates the reader to become engrossed into the victim's life. This study also provokes a higher interest in genocidal incidents and should urge its readers not to be idle in current-day occurrences that are similar to the events addressed in this study such as the Darfur conflict.

Darfuri women and girls are under constant threat of rape and physical assault by the Janjaweed, Arabic armed gunman. Young girls are at risk of being raped and attacked when they leave their homes or refugee camps to gather food and firewood. Families face difficult choices each day for survival - do they send out husbands and sons who may be killed, or mothers and daughters, who may be raped and beaten? A woman's virtue is to be protected so why are women still being victimized on such a large scale? It is intolerable that following American slavery, the Holocaust, and the genocide in Rwanda that people are still being openly murdered and raped for the world to witness.

This thesis salutes the women in the Holocaust and American slavery whose memory remain alive through this project. It also enriches our knowledge of female bondage in the Holocaust and American slavery while serving as an innovative perspective in women's studies.

In view of the fact that the representative male narrative of the Holocaust and American slavery omits the immense struggles encountered by women this thesis highlights their neglect. Conceivably, the male authors were somewhat oblivious to the ill-treatment women endured. Or the male perspective was regarded as an adequate depiction for all those involved in the enslavement. Nonetheless, the female voice was historically overshadowed by the male narrative.

Undeniably, women bore quite a burden being subject to rape and public shame accompanied by the constant fear of separation from their families. The researcher's aim was to provide a voice for these marginalized females and present a more profound understanding of the immense hardships they underwent to keep their families together and safe from their oppressors.

Foundations as racism and sexism led to the merciless acts of slavery and the genocidal Holocaust. The researcher's belief is that enslaved women have suffered in ways incomparable to men as a result of their sex. The female experience differs from male enslavement primarily by the vile act of rape. Through these forced sexual acts women not only lost their dignity but also became mothers, which forced them to care for children they did not want. Female victims not only encountered sexual assault but

carried the credence of disgrace by the social stigma attached to unapproved sexual activity, even though, the action was usually against their wills.

Irrefutably, men suffered abuse, starvation, and endless physical labor, but they did not have the burden of being sexually assaulted by the enslaver. Men also had a better chance to escape captivity since child rearing typically fell under the mother's duties. Indeed, a greater appreciation for women's sufferings is deserved. As a result of their endurance, generations lived on to develop a legacy founded on their ability to nurture through adversity. In the absence of men, African-American women raised generations after generations. Once slavery ended black women stood along side men as providers leading the way to a new demonizing stereotype of Sapphire who emasculates black man by usurping their role.

Jewish women, too, surpassed their traditional role as homemaker when men could no longer find employment as German hostility grew stronger. Memoirs indicate that women trained for the workforce and retrained when they lost those jobs. A mother and daughter took courses in Spanish, English, baking, and fine cookery, then asked their laundress to accept them as apprentices (Ofer & Weitzman 41).

The significance of this study is the bonding experience and coping methods of women that transcends race. Degradation, humiliation and perseverance are universal themes shared by abused women and link them together indefinitely. It is imperative that victims in subjugated groups realize abuse should not be internalized or marginalized. Moreover, scholars should note that gender studies are an important function in the overall search for accountability. In closing, this study is not claiming that women

underwent a more difficult enslavement from men but to specify that there were, indisputably, grave differences that should not be disregarded.

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